

MannAboutTown

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Martin Cohen For Art's Sake

by Camille Tibaldeo

The scene: Manhattan's Fountain Gallery, Ninth Avenue at 48th Street, on a balmy fall afternoon days before the opening of "Abstraction: A Fractured Reality," the Gallery's first group exhibition of the 2007-08 season. The curator has propped 40 artworks against the walls in the positions selected for hanging, and artist Martin Cohen is observing the placement of his oil on canvas painting *Indian Burial*. The show's largest work and one of eight of Cohen's pieces to be included, it has been given pride of place on the main wall, freshly painted a luminous pale gray which sets off the abstract's bold structure, texture and colors: orange, pink, green, blue, red, gold, silver, and white.

"Hey, Marty, do I see a hole in that canvas?" a Fountain Gallery volunteer jokingly asks the artist. A look of mock horror crossing his face, the 48-year-old Cohen, an experienced fine art restorer as well as an accomplished painter, examines *Indian Burial* and reassures himself that the piece is intact. It has so many layers of color that when asked which came first, Cohen replies, "I can't remember. I did the bulk of it over a period of about a week, and at times I was just pouring on the paint—color after color. Then I added to it over the next couple of years. I do know that the white was added near the end."

It's not surprising that he can't recall the exact sequence of colors; *Indian Burial* was conceived back in 1986, while he was pursuing graduate studies at Carnegie Mellon and living in Pittsburgh's Shadyside suburb, which he remembers as "a lush, green, peaceful environment which inspired me." His work had been moving toward the abstract, and under the tutelage of renowned artist Sam Gil-

liam, "I began experimenting with the heavy use of oil and enamel paints. I had realized that by moving away from the figurative I could free up my work and really concentrate on color." Abstract Expressionism remains Cohen's signature style, and he often works on a large scale, "which means that I have an even more serious storage problem than most New Yorkers."

The eldest of three children, Queens-born Cohen later moved with his family to Roslyn, Long Island and while still a boy enrolled in figure drawing classes at C.W. Post College. His drawings from this period demonstrate a remarkable artistic maturity. (He has stacks of meticulously arranged books chronicling his work from childhood to the present.) The teenage Cohen had an opportunity to apprentice with artist Clayton Pond, giving the neophyte his first taste of the SoHo art scene. He earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from the State University of New York at Purchase, where noted critic Irving Sandler got him thinking about Abstract Expressionism. Cohen continued his studies at the Studio of School of New York until his acceptance at Carnegie Mellon, which awarded him a Master of Fine Arts degree in 1986.

Two degrees in hand, Cohen left the protective cocoon of academia and returned to New York City to pursue his artistic vision. While continuing to paint, he freelanced as an installer, framer and restorer of fine art, and in the late 1980s he founded the gallery Ten B.C. (Tenth Street between Avenues B and C) in the

East Village. "It was important to me that it be a cooperative, and it was, in the truest sense of the word," says Cohen. "The artists did whatever it took to be able to exhibit their work." He mounted monthly shows including his pieces and also spotlighting the work of other artists he admired. Ten B.C. generated positive buzz, until he lost the space and was forced to close in 1992.

Cohen had been struggling with mental illness since his early twenties, and the gallery's demise sent him into a tailspin. He had been hospitalized several times over the years, with diagnoses ranging from schizophrenia to bipolar disorder. ("My last diagnosis was schizoaffective disorder," he says wryly. "I guess I'm hard to figure out.") Eventually he discovered a support system that would open the door to a new phase of his artistic journey: He found his way to Fountain House, an internationally recognized organization on West 47th Street which since 1948 has provided housing, employment and educational services to people living with major mental illness. (Cohen now sits on the Fountain House Board of Directors.)

In the late 1990s, it was decided that Fountain House would open an art gallery with the mission of challenging the stigma surrounding mental illness by showcasing the talents of artists living and working with it. With his gallery know-how and expertise as an artist, Cohen was in the right place at the right time. The fledgling Fountain Gallery, a not-for-profit cooperative, opened for

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(Clockwise from left) Martin Cohen; *Indian Burial*, 1986-88; *David Bowie, Then and Now*, 2003

business a couple of blocks from Fountain House in the summer of 2000, beginning with a handful of artists and community volunteers. Today, at seven years and counting, the Gallery represents more than 40 artists (all Fountain House members) and has presented more than 40 exhibitions of works in various mediums.

"When I look at Fountain Gallery now," says Cohen, "I can't believe the growth and the level of professionalism. There was so much to do to get it up and running and to keep it going at the beginning that there was no time to think ahead to what it might become. And here we are."

His work has been on view at venues around town, and in addition to participating in numerous Fountain Gallery group shows Cohen has had two solo exhibitions there: "Doors of Expression" featured his signature abstracts executed on large wood doors rather than on

canvas or paper, and "Wishful, Sinful, Wicked You" (from the lyric of a song by the Doors), presented his slyly witty collages, which comment on notables from the realms of history, politics and celebrity. In the fall of 2006, he had a one-man show at the prestigious East Side gallery Vivian Horan Fine Art, and his work is included in the corporate collections of the Estée Lauder Companies Inc., Eli Lilly and Company, and Citigroup.

Cohen has recently returned to drawing in pastels, "kind of going back to the beginning," as he puts it. Currently without a studio space, he has been working in his West 50s apartment, where the walls are covered with his paintings. He draws inspiration from listening to music (jazz, pop, classical) from a collection of more than two thousand CDs, tapes, and DVDs. In addition to abstract works on canvas and paper, "door paintings" and collages, he has created more than 300 photojournalistic paintings of music and pop culture icons from David

Bowie and Madonna to Dizzy Gillespie and Miles Davis.

When he puts down the paintbrush, Cohen enjoys shooting hoops for relaxation, and he socializes with a closely knit circle of friends. ("They have to be Mets fans," he deadpans.) But it is artistic expression which is the constant in his life, and the many appreciators of his extraordinary work fondly hope that he will continue to answer its call. **M**

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